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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000109

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/19/2017

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: AOUN CORNERED, CORRUPTED, OLD FRIENDS SAY

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: 1.4 (d)

SUMMARY

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11. (S) Two longtime Michel Aoun supporters, one also a close friend of Walid Jumblatt, described Aoun as "cornered" in his standoff against the government of Prime Minister Siniora. While a reconciliation with Jumblatt could help resolve the political crisis, Aoun's son-in-law Gebran Bassil has sabotaged any effort in that direction so far. Aoun is stuck in an opposition movement going nowhere because of his acceptance of Syrian and Iranian funds, the two speculated, and because Aoun's supporters realize that unless he succeeds, their political careers are finished. The Free Patriotic Movement's Orange TV is just one vehicle for laundering illicit funding for the party. Were he to achieve the presidency Aoun would remain a destructive influence, as he would likely attempt to reverse the balance of power put in place by the Ta'if Agreement. Aoun is concerned about his position vis-a-vis the USG, and may be too stubborn and arrogant to negotiate with his Lebanese adversaries toward a solution. End Summary.

12. (C) Polchief called on Dr. Nabil Tawil, a cardiac surgeon uniquely placed in Lebanese politics as, simultaneously, a confidant of Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader Michel Aoun and a childhood friend of Druze leader Walid Jumblatt. Jumblatt was Aoun's pro-Syrian military adversary during the Lebanese Civil War and is now his anti-Syrian political adversary. Polstaff and Tawil's son Hadi joined the meeting at Tawil's home in the affluent Beirut suburb of Rabieh, as did Nizar Zakka, a Sunni Aoun supporter, whose acquaintance with Aoun goes back to a friendship between Aoun and Zakka's father. Tawil is a frequent visitor to the house Aoun is using in Rabieh, provided by a supporter rent-free. The rumors that Aoun purchased an expensive piece of land in Jounieh to build his own home are false, Tawil said.

RECONCILIATION EFFORTS FRUITLESS

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13. (C) Tawil described his attempts to engineer a reconciliation between his two close friends on several occasions since Aoun's 2005 return to Lebanon. But tensions between Jumblatt's March 14 coalition and Aoun (and later the Aoun-Hizballah opposition movement) have frustrated his efforts on each occasion. Jumblatt and Aoun were to meet at Tawil's home, for example, in December 2005 but Aoun's

son-in-law Gebran Bassil allegedly leaked the plan to the press, embarrassing both.

14. (C) Tawil said he brokered a telephone call from Jumblatt to Aoun in September 2006 in which Jumblatt apologized for the Druze dispossession of Christians in the Chouf. It was a promising start, but Bassil again scotched the reconciliation by announcing and hastily organizing a Conference on the Displaced to highlight Jumblatt's role in defrauding funds dedicated to compensate Chouf Christians. This made Jumblatt furious and pushed any reconciliation farther into the future. Nevertheless, Tawil hopes for a rapprochement between Aoun and Jumblatt on the individual level and between Lebanon's opposing political blocs on the national scale.

#### AOUN IS CORNERED

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15. (C) Aoun is cornered, Tawil said repeatedly, with clear pity for his old friend. He knows he is losing Christian support and that the opposition is running out of acceptable options, but he does not know the way out. The escalation threatened by the opposition is "just a bluff," he said. The opposition does not want to be blamed for sectarian strife in Lebanon or for ruining Lebanon's chances for financial salvation at the January 25 Paris III donor conference.

16. (S) Aoun is looking for a way out, Tawil said, but cannot simply leave the opposition movement. If Aoun has not accepted a compromise deal with the government up to now, Tawil speculated, the only interpretation is that the General is being controlled by some unknown party. Polchief asked whether Tawil meant that Aoun was being blackmailed, perhaps by the party or parties which had provided his suspiciously

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lavish party funding, so evident in FPM's vast media campaigns and Aoun's security force among other things. Tawil and Zakka nodded affirmatively. (Note: Tawil did not repeat to us what he allegedly told Jumblatt recently -- that Aoun was in the habit of receiving "bags of money" from Syrian or Iranian sources. His clear implication, however, was that Aoun was deep in illicit financing. End Note.)

#### GEBRAN BASSIL -- A CORRUPTING INFLUENCE

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17. (S) The General does not know every financial decision that has been taken on his behalf, Tawil averred. However his son-in-law, Gebran Bassil, is in the political conflict "for the money" Zakka claimed, noting Bassil's luxurious lifestyle. He shared with us, as an example, that Bassil's armored Audi car was a gift from opposition Marada Party leader Suleiman Franjeh, who got the car from his family friend Bashar Asad.

18. (S) Despite Aoun's obvious devotion to Bassil, based on making his daughter Chantal (pregnant anew, Zakka informed us) happy, Bassil is universally reviled within the FPM. Still, Aoun brings Bassil into every meeting he has, even those the interlocutor asks to make "private." (Tawil is an exception, he claims -- as an old friend, he rates Aoun one-on-one.)

19. (S) Bassil ran for a municipal council seat in his native Batroun before running for parliament in 2005, Tawil informed us, and failed to win even that modest post. His involvement with the FPM was peripheral at best during Aoun's time in exile. Bassil came to true prominence as the father of the FPM's February 2006 "Memorandum of Understanding" with Hizballah. He remains the FPM's principal conduit to Hizballah. Should Aoun obtain a larger share of cabinet seats, Tawil and Zakka suggested, Bassil would be made a minister with one of the powerful portfolios -- a prospect that elicited cringes from our interlocutors.

ORANGE TV MONEY LAUNDERING

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¶10. (S) By his own account, Bassil masterminded the FPM's launch of its Orange TV share offering in October, and he then boasted to Polchief at the time that the public response was overwhelming. Even before the offering, a well-resourced advertising campaign had papered Beirut with orange billboards to drum up buyers for the stock's low-priced shares. There are individual buyers among FPM's rank-and-file, Tawil admitted. But the largest shareholder in Orange TV is Shia MP Abbas Hashem, a member of Aoun's parliamentary bloc known to be Hizballah's agent within the bloc. Tawil and Zakka were skeptical that Orange TV's fundraising success could be attributed to individual investors alone.

A DISASTER AS PRESIDENT  
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¶11. (C) Why would Aoun, or anyone else for that matter, want to be the President of Lebanon, Polchief asked, with the office's limited visibility and powers. Aoun wants to enhance the powers of the president, Tawil answered. He rejects the Ta'if Agreement now, just as he sought to block its creation in 1989. Aoun wishes to restore powers to the Christian President of Lebanon that the office has not enjoyed since before the Agreement.

¶12. (C) Does Aoun not appreciate that the other confessional groups in Lebanon would never agree to give up executive powers to the Christian presidency, PolChief asked. Tawil doubted that Aoun had any reasonable plan for securing their agreement. Asked what Aoun's advisors are telling him, Tawil answered that Aoun has no advisors. With a history of following bad advice, including his own counsel, Aoun would be a disaster as president, Tawil admitted.

FPM POST-AOUN?  
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¶13. (C) As for Aoun's followers, Tawil characterized Aoun bloc MPs Farid el-Khazen and Ghassan Mukheiber as thoughtful, independent leaders who are committed to the FPM for its

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ideas and ideals. MP Ibrahim Kenaan, frequently a moderate voice of the FPM, is nevertheless a purely political animal interested only in what the FPM can do for him. The same describes Kenaan's less-talented, less-prominent colleagues in the remainder of Aoun's bloc. Polchief asked what would happen to the FPM should Aoun retire from politics or give up his quest to be anything more than an MP. Tawil answered with no hesitation that the party would fly apart. There is no internal cohesion or structure, no succession process (Aoun abhors the concept of hereditary succession, Tawil said, a convenient attribute for a Lebanese leader without a son), and leading FPM figures are jealous and distrustful of each other. The prospect of Aoun's MPs ending up in the political wilderness without an Aoun presidency may be one of the factors driving Aoun and his party to their avid search for that post.

DOES AOUN HAVE A FUTURE WITH US?  
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¶14. (C) Tawil asked the question that he had been saving for the meeting: "Is Aoun important to the United States?" Polchief answered that inasmuch as Aoun is an important leader of the Christians in Lebanon, that is his importance to the USG. He may never be the United States' principal partner in Lebanon, but he is an undeniable figure in Lebanese politics. If he were to suddenly be elected President tomorrow, the USG would continue to have normal relations with Lebanon -- more normal, in fact, than our present relations with a Lebanon saddled with Emile Lahoud as Chief of State.

¶15. (C) Polchief continued that even though Aoun's public statements criticizing the United States and the west have been an irritant, and the suspicious financing of Aoun and his party remains a concern, and the FPM's pact with Hizballah is of greatest concern, the door is still open to Aoun. The Embassy meets with Aoun and his followers frequently, Polchief noted, pointing out that we had had meetings with several MP's in Aoun's bloc, and with FPM officials and Aoun relatives, in the past several weeks. The Ambassador might call on Aoun again soon, he added. Tawil proposed brokering a meeting between Aoun and the Ambassador at his home, hoping that Aoun would be willing to discuss his bottom line across the neighborhood from his compound, from Bassil, and from the media.

HOW CAN WE HELP?

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¶16. (C) Finally, Tawil asked, "How can we help?" Polchief answered that he was about to ask the same question on behalf of the USG. Washington does not have the answers to Lebanon's problems; only the Lebanese can find them. But to answer Tawil's question, Polchief suggested that he convince Aoun to take a good compromise deal now, while he is still in a relatively strong position. The opposition should not escalate its protests before the Paris III conference, imperiling Lebanon's financial lifeline. After Paris III, the government may score a great victory for Lebanon and have the clear edge over the opposition. Meanwhile, the economy is suffering from the continued turmoil. Now is the time to compromise.

FELTMAN